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The Boston Globe

Save on the cruise, splurge on the outings

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When an Alaska cruise ships stop, there can be time for paddling through Orca Cove near Ketchikan, with Southeast Sea Kayaks, or landing on a glacial summit above Juneau, with Four Glacier and Dog Sled Adventure by Helicopter. (Photos By Steve Haggerty for The Boston Globe)

By [Anne Z. Cooke](#)
Globe Correspondent / January 30, 2011

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KETCHIKAN, Alaska — Like a lot of other summer travelers looking for the ultimate Alaska adventure, I've already booked my cruise to the Last Frontier. I've got my cabin and I'm ready to roll. But that's not like me. I usually let the weeks slide by, hoping to score a last-minute deal on a cheap inside cabin on one of the 20-odd mega-ships sailing Alaska's icy waters.

Not this year, though. With travelers watching their wallets and hundreds of cabins up for grabs, I made my move early, nailing one of Princess Cruises' seven-day, one-way deals for \$649. I could have taken a round-trip Royal Caribbean cruise for \$589, but I want to stay on in Alaska before I fly home. As long as my so-called stateroom has the bare minimum — a bed, a desk, and a bathroom — I'm happy. If this cruise is like others I've taken, I won't be in my room much, except to shower and sleep.

Alaska's the kind of far-north destination where I would rather be on deck with my binoculars, searching for breaching whales or sea lions on the rocks. If the sky opens up and it pours, look for me in the lounge, playing bridge or learning how to tango. Either way, I figure I'm paying about half of what Princess would like to charge me, if only the economy was leaning the company's way. And it isn't the only cruise line with deals. I could be aboard Holland America, Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, Carnival, or Norwegian Cruise Line for about the same price.

I know what you're thinking: Use those savings on an airline ticket. But there's a smarter way to spend your dollars. Treat yourself to a couple of pricey but fabulous shore tours, the sort of blue-ribbon experiences you would ordinarily bypass. Offered by every ship in nearly every port, these are unique to Alaska.

If your ship stops in Haines, sign up for the \$99 Jet Boat Tour, a naturalist-guided foray into the heart of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a rich habitat not just for eagles but for bears and moose. In Skagway, skip the jewelry stores for the White Pass and Yukon Railroad and a breathtaking ride up a narrow mountain track toward White Pass and the Yukon border (\$115).

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Ketchikan's hottest new experience is the Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour, held on the Aleutian Ballad, the self-same fishing boat featured in the Discovery Channel show "Most Dangerous Catch." The Ballad's owners, who fish in the Bering Sea, anchored the ship at the dock in Ketchikan and refitted one side of the main deck with theater-style seats for guests. Experienced fishermen working on the far deck show you how crabbing is done, while the ship tours the harbor, followed by dozens of eagles trailing the scraps. For the best ticket prices, book in advance on the website.

In Juneau, the half-day Four Glacier and Dog Sled Adventure by Helicopter (\$499) takes you on an adrenaline-rush flight over snowcapped peaks to a glacier where a dozen dog teams and their handlers camp out for the season and take visitors on half-mile rides. In Sitka, cold-water enthusiasts with dive experience can do a three-quarter-day guided scuba dive for \$435, including dry suits, gear, and air.

"We recently introduced a community service tour, Cruise with a Purpose," said Sarah Scoltock, a Holland America spokeswoman. "A marine science vessel takes you from Juneau to Auke Bay to record and document humpback whales, collect water samples, and measure plankton concentrations." The tour ends with a naturalist-guided walk on the beach and an introduction to Alaska's shoreline biology.

Back in the day, most Alaskan cruise ship shore tours could have passed for amateur fund-raisers. Bus tours, guided town walks, and salmon bakes were fresh enough to startle and amaze first-timers. But shore tours today are an evolved species. Thirty years ago few guides talked about melting glaciers, warmer weather, and endangered wildlife; today they are sophisticated and informed.

"The first time I came, there weren't more than a dozen different tours," said Leesa Burzynski, a shore excursion manager with Celebrity Cruises. "Now we work with more than 56 tour outfitters providing more than 161 different excursions."

I asked Burzynski about the Glacier Flight and Feast tour, a flight over vast ice summits, followed by salmon, salad, biscuits, and dessert at Taku Glacier Lodge. She gave it a thumbs up.

"I tell people, if you're coming to Alaska and you don't get up in the air and fly, you're not going to see things in perspective," she said. You simply can't appreciate how vast these tidewater glaciers are until you're right over them."

When I'm choosing a tour, I pass on things I can do anywhere, such as mountain biking and zip lining. But read the fine print before you say no. In Sitka, kayaking is the best way to get close to rafts of sea otters, seals on rocks, and even orcas. In Ketchikan, you can tour a Native American community and talk to the residents, descendants of Alaska's first people.

Some shore tours go for laughs, such as the rides on the land-and-water, amphibious "duck" trucks, also offered in Ketchikan. But there are others — walking tours — that you can do by yourself. For these, look for a self-guided map at tourist information centers, often located on or near the dock.

The Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau keeps a list of recommended outfitters, historians, fishermen, and naturalists who can serve as guides for kayaking, salmon fishing, and wildlife tours, says Dave Nevins, director of visitor services. But don't count on making plans at the last minute, he advised. "Tell people they need to do a little Internet research, see what's available, and make reservations ahead of time," he said. "When a cruise ship docks, we get a line of people in here who aren't sure what they want to do and find they have to scramble."

Sitka's greatest treasure is the little-heralded Sheldon Jackson Museum, the repository of what many say is North America's finest collection of native Alaskan crafts and artifacts.

“And don’t miss Sitka’s Russian dancers [\$8], or the historic Russian church [\$2], or the totem poles in the National Historical Park,” said Nevins. The park accepts all federally-issued passes, including senior, lifetime, and annual passes.

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